



**Department of
Veterans Affairs**

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Fact Sheet

The National Cemetery Administration

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In the second summer of a war that few believed would last more than a few months and with thousands already dead, Congress enacted legislation on July 17, 1862, authorizing the president to purchase “cemetery grounds” for use as national cemeteries “for soldiers who shall have died in the service of the country.” Fourteen cemeteries were established that first year, including one in Sharpsburg, Md., where 4,476 Union soldiers were laid to rest after the one-day Battle of Antietam. (By comparison, approximately 3,000 Americans, British and Canadians died on June 6, 1944, in the invasion of Normandy.)

By 1870, the remains of nearly 300,000 Union dead had been buried in 73 national cemeteries. Most of the cemeteries were located in the Southeast, near the battlefields and campgrounds of the war. After the war, the Quartermaster General directed Army crews to scour the countryside to locate the remains of soldiers who had died in battle. They were buried in the new national cemeteries, which were enclosed by brick walls and entered through ornate gates. Tragically, however, the identities of nearly half of those who died in service to the Union and are buried in national cemeteries are unknown.

What would become a National Cemetery System under the Army evolved slowly from the initial period of great challenge associated with the Civil War. All honorably discharged veterans became eligible for burial in 1873. Cemeteries associated with military posts on the western frontier, such as Ft. McPherson, Neb., were added in the late 19th century.

In 1923, Congress established the American Battle Monuments Commission, an independent agency responsible for maintaining burial grounds in foreign countries of American Armed Forces members who died in World War I, World War II or the Mexican War. The Commission maintains 24 American military cemeteries as well as monuments and memorials

In the 1930s, new national cemeteries were established to serve veterans living in metropolitan areas such as New York, Baltimore, Minneapolis, San Diego, San Francisco and San Antonio. Several, closely associated with battlefields such as Gettysburg, were transferred to the National Park Service because of their value in interpreting the historical significance of the battles. In 1973, Congress authorized the transfer of 82 national cemeteries from the Department of the Army to the Veterans Administration, now the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Joining with 21 VA cemeteries located at hospitals and nursing homes, the National Cemetery System comprised 103 cemeteries after the transfer.

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On Nov. 11, 1998, congressional legislation changed the name of the National Cemetery System (NCS) to the National Cemetery Administration (NCA).

Today, there are 136 national cemeteries. VA, through its National Cemetery Administration, operates 120 of them. Two national cemeteries – Arlington in Virginia and the U.S. Soldiers' and Airmen's Home in Washington, D.C. – are still administered by the Army. Fourteen national cemeteries are maintained by the Department of the Interior.

More than three million people, including veterans of every war and conflict – from the Revolutionary War to the war in Iraq – are honored by burial in VA's national cemeteries, which have a total of more than 14,200 acres of land from Hawaii to Maine and from Alaska to Puerto Rico. More than 300 recipients of the Medal of Honor are buried in VA's national cemeteries. Monuments and memorials recall the courage and sacrifice of Americans – from Nathan Hale to "Edson's Raiders," Marine commandos who fought in the Solomon Islands' campaign during WWII.

In November 2001, VA opened its 120th cemetery – Fort Sill National Cemetery in Oklahoma. Currently, 60 VA cemeteries, in 34 states, are able to provide both casket and cremation burials for America's veterans and their families. An additional 23 provide burial for family members of those already buried and can also bury cremated remains.

In 1999 and 2003, with the passage of two laws, Congress directed VA to establish 12 new national cemeteries. One of those is the Fort Sill National Cemetery. The rest – one in Alabama, two in California, three in Florida, one in Georgia, one in Michigan, two in Pennsylvania and one in South Carolina – will be located near large populations of veterans who currently do not have access to burial in a veteran's cemetery.

In addition to providing a gravesite, VA opens and closes the grave, provides a headstone or marker, a Presidential Memorial Certificate and a U.S. Flag, and perpetually cares for the grave at no cost to the veteran's family.

To complement national cemeteries and expand burial options for veterans, VA assists states in building or improving state veterans cemeteries through its State Cemetery Grants Program. VA will pay for construction costs in exchange for states providing the land and operating the cemeteries. Sixty-two state veterans' cemeteries have been funded by VA grants in 32 states and Guam, and in 2004 they provided more than 19,000 interments.

Today, more than 25 million veterans, active duty service members killed in action, and some current and former Reservists and National Guard members have earned the right to burial in a national cemetery. Veterans with discharges "other than dishonorable," their spouses and dependent children are eligible for burial in a VA national cemetery.

For more information or to confirm eligibility, contact the nearest national cemetery or a VA regional office at 1-800-827-1000. Information also is available on NCA's home page at <http://www.cem.va.gov>.

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